

DIFFERENT THEMATIC APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF CONSCIOUSNESS



By Cam Danielson

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The topic of consciousness elicits a wide range of responses, given the lack of consensus on its definition. Underscoring the challenge is the dialectical dilemma posed by Western scientific approaches versus various mystical traditions, both Western and Eastern. It is basically a subject-object problem:

How can a dualistic state of being observe a nondualistic state of being? To further complicate the matter, even this description of the problem is unsatisfactory to those who would argue that consciousness is nothing more than ego consciousness.

Carl Jung, who is considered rather mystical in his scientific orientation, nicely illustrates the subject-object problem of consciousness. He writes that, "consciousness is inconceivable without an ego; it is equated with the relation of contents to an ego. If there is no ego there is nobody to be conscious of anything. . . . The Eastern mind, however, has no difficulty in conceiving of a consciousness without an ego. Consciousness is deemed capable of transcending its ego condition; indeed, in its 'higher' forms, the ego disappears altogether. . . . I do not doubt the existence of mental states transcending consciousness, but they lose their consciousness to exactly the same degree that they transcend consciousness." ("The Difference between Eastern and Western Thinking," in *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell, 1976, p. 491.)

Jung's proposition that consciousness has limitations comes from a man whose robust definition of the psyche includes the ego (differentiated consciousness), the personal unconscious (undifferentiated consciousness), and the collective unconscious (transpersonal consciousness). Clearly a time-space continuum is not a limiting factor in consciousness (ego awareness), but then

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what are the mental states transcending consciousness, or is this merely a case of linguistics, and we would all be better served by good comparative analysis of terminology?

For those literal adherents of the scientific method, consciousness is framed by the physical boundaries of the earth-life system. Of course the definition of our physical boundaries is constantly under revision, but the approach is one of “empirical verification.” In essence, only what is observed through our physical senses is the proper study of science (laboratory instruments are extensions of our senses). Philosophically, this orientation is known as logical positivism and shows up in universities under the umbrella of cognitive studies. For these individuals, the study of consciousness is the study of the brain and its functioning and the effects on human behavior that result with changes to brain functioning. A worthy endeavor, in which most everyone will agree that brain chemistry does have an impact on ego development and altered states of awareness. Nonetheless, the question of what comes first, the brain or consciousness, can only be answered one way for logical positivists.

Then there are those who want to start looking for a definition of consciousness somewhere between a religious (mystical) and a scientific (empirical) orientation. For these individuals (whom I call Human Potential advocates), evidence of extraordinary human functioning (out-of-body experiences, remote viewing, death-defying feats of endurance, etc.) illustrates aspects of consciousness that extend beyond the laws of a physical universe. They start with events or experiences and create models or theories based on inductive reasoning or inference. These are not “scientific” theories in the traditional use of the term (independently verified by other scientists), but rather are theories verified by repeated individual experiences or collective patterns of experience. For those in this middle orientation, consciousness exists across a spectrum extending beyond space and time in which “an individual observer” is present (pure awareness), though the question remains as to who or what that observer is and how it relates to the unique ego-based personality bound by space and time.

To this last point, developmental psychologists have noted that the ego continues to evolve throughout our lives (the idea that there are elements of personality fixed after a certain point in time remains true, though it is not immutable). The ego has a regulating function in integrating the different aspects of personality. Introducing the concept of an “observer” in the experience of Self is part of the emergence of greater personal-efficacy (what might be described as inner guidance). Ego development is therefore critical to the translation (integration) of transpersonal experiences. As one psychologist notes about the direction of human growth and development: “In the Judeo-Christian cosmology there is the Garden of Eden at the beginning and the Kingdom of God at the end. The two are not the same. The Garden of Eden is the original pre-ego state of mind. The Kingdom of God is a return to our original condition but as ego-conscious individuals. . . . The point is to break through to an insight into our original nature as mature adults and to integrate that insight into our conception of ourselves and of the world. This cannot be accomplished without an ego.” (V. Walter Odajnyk, *Gathering the Light: A Psychology of Meditation*, 1993, pp. 65–66.)

From a developmental perspective, consciousness is not only a spectrum but an expanding spectrum that enriches what has come before as the ego extends its linking or integrating mechanism to incorporate new elements of the Self.


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Mystical or Contemplative Traditions	Human Potential Movement	Developmental Psychology	Logical Positivism
<p>Within the major religions, a mystical element exists with a long history in practices requisite to union with consciousness in its pure form (God/Tao/Atman, etc.).</p> <p>Descriptions of the nature of this consciousness are found in the works of various mystics within each of the different traditions. Below is a small sample of references:</p> <p><u>Judeo-Christian</u></p> <p>The Cloud of Unknowing</p> <p>Meister Eckhart</p> <p>Teresea of Avila</p> <p>The Desert Fathers</p> <p>Bernard of Clairvaux</p> <p>Kabbalah</p> <p>Origen of Alexandria</p> <p>The Gnostics</p>	<p>The title of this section originates with the West Coast and writers such as Aldus Huxley, George Leonard, Stanislav Grof, Gregory Bateson, Abraham Maslow, and Michael Murphy. The summa on metanormal functioning was written by Murphy entitled, <i>The Future of the Body: Exploration in the Further Evolution of Human Nature</i>. Published in 1993, it is still the best synthesis of worldwide research on the topic.</p> <p>Themes covered in the research include:</p> <p>Perception of external events, such as remote viewing.</p> <p>Somatic awareness and self-regulation, such as observing chakras or spontaneous rushes of energy up and down the spine.</p>	<p>The idea that underlying human nature is a drive towards self-realization is the psychological counterpart to the philosophical and religious doctrines of emanation. Humankind has a divine aspect that is the source of our original nature. From this original nature we have “fallen” into the human condition and seek a path of return.</p> <p>Developmentally, the journey to self-realization is not a straight line. Shifts of consciousness are evident in the way individuals adapt to their changing environments. This implies stages or states of adjustment.</p> <p>Developmental psychologists influential in emerging theories of consciousness include: Jean Piaget, Carl Jung, Marie-Louise von Franz, Erich Neumann, Edward Edinger,</p>	<p>The term “hard sciences” may imply a high standard of inquiry, but in effect, it means experimental control for purposes of repeatability in results and therefore high statistical validation. Scientists with this orientation are prone to view consciousness as too vague a term and prefer to focus on the physical manifestations of brain functioning (see the example of motion-induced blindness discovered by Bonne, Cooperman, and Sagi).</p> <p>A subset of this group is philosophers and psychologists whose focus on cognition is based on how the way we think influences what we experience. Writers and researchers within this</p>

<p><u>Hindu</u></p> <p>Bhagavad Gita</p> <p>Upanishads</p> <p>Yoga Sutras of Patanjali</p> <p>Sri Aurobindo</p> <p><u>Buddhist</u></p> <p>Mahayana Sutras</p> <p>Heart Sutras of Prajnaparamita</p> <p>I Ching (The Book of Changes)</p> <p>The Tibetan Book of the Dead</p> <p><u>Islam</u></p> <p>Sufism is the mystical arm of Islam, but I am not familiar with the writings of any Sufi mystic. This is an area for future research.</p>	<p>Communication abilities, such as telepathy.</p> <p>Vitality, such as experiencing immense energy or enduring extreme physical hardships.</p> <p>Movement abilities, such as levitation and out-of-body experiences.</p> <p>Abilities to alter the environment directly, such as mind over matter in altering another person's mood or correcting a machine's malfunction by mental intention alone.</p> <p>Pain and pleasure, such as eliminating pain by willing it away or experiencing profound joy during a routine task.</p> <p>Cognition, such as correctly sensing unexpected danger or apprehending a place as if you had experienced it before.</p> <p>Volition, such as</p>	<p>Eric Erickson, Lawrence Kohlberg, Robert Kegan, and Bill Torbert.</p> <p>Of special note is Neumann's book, <i>The Origins and History of Consciousness</i>. Neumann outlines what he describes as the mythological states in the evolution of consciousness and the psychological states in the development of personality.</p> <p>In parallel with this group, are psychologists and "clinical philosophers" who marry psychotherapeutic backgrounds with practice in Eastern religious traditions.</p> <p>They see an opportunity to integrate the "higher" and "lower" dimensions of consciousness into a coherent theory relevant to individuals from different cultural backgrounds and life experiences.</p>	<p>orientation tend to exist across a spectrum of those more "friendly" to the mystical, versus those who debunk "otherworldly" explanations of consciousness (the idea of the soul, as Francois Crick wrote, is just that—an imagined idea).</p> <p>In the camp of the former are Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, F. David Peat, and David Bohm (interestingly they are all physicists).</p> <p>Writers and researchers in the latter group include Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Francis Crick, Oliver Sacks, and Eric Kandel.</p>
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	<p>accomplishing a superhuman feat of strength or endurance.</p> <p>Individuation and sense of self, such as feeling your body to be only a small part of yourself or experiencing an identity that existed before your birth.</p> <p>Love, such as unity experiences with another or others.</p>	<p>Writers in this group include Alan Watts, Walter Odajnyk, Mark Epstein, and Ken Wilber.</p>	
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